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The Prevalence and Perceived Seriousness of Victimization by Crime; Some Results of the International Crime Victims Survey

1. INTRODUCTION

In many countries both property crimes and crimes of violence have risen substantially over the past thirty years. The problems of crime and feelings of insecurity are looming high on the political agendas in many European countries. According to opinion polls, crime is one of the most pressing concerns of the general public, as well of the business community. Especially in the larger cities the burden of crime threatens to undermine the quality of life. In addition, organized crime and corruption threaten to undermine the integrity of both the business world and the state. Governments across the world are being confronted with serious crime problems. Many types of crime have also acquired international dimensions. Against this background the collection and dissemination of internationally comparable statistics on crime is of great importance for both policy-making and research.

Until recently, comparisons of crime in different countries were usually based on offences recorded by the police. The fact that not all offences are reported to the police (and even if reported are not always recorded) led to the development in several countries of the use of sample surveys to ask people directly about their experience of crime, whether or not reported to the police. The Netherlands and England and Wales, for instance, have such national surveys, providing an important alternative index of crime to set beside police statistics.

The potential of victim surveys for comparative purposes did not go unnoticed and some attempts were made to use results to examine relative levels of victimization (*see*, e.g., Braithwaite and Biles, 1980; Van Dijk and Steinmetz, 1983; Block, 1984; Killias, 1989). However, by no means all countries have mounted victim surveys, and those which have use different methods. Ensuing problems of comparability were as confusing as with police figures.[2]

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2. Differences in survey design and administration influence both the amount and the type of victimization measured. The technical differences at issue include: the number of people interviewed in the household; sampling frame and age range; mode of interviewer, 'screening' methods and number of 'screeners'; 'recall' period; and response rates.

As these problems became apparent, a number of standardized questionnaires were developed with international comparisons in mind, although they tended to be restricted in offence coverage, and not always identically administered (Clinard, 1978; Kirchhoff and Kirchhoff, 1984; Sveri, 1982). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development recommended uniform surveys for OECD countries to measure 'victimization' through both accidents or criminal harm (OECD, 1976). Some pilot work was done in 1982 (Tornudd, 1982), but thereafter the initiative flagged. Companion postal surveys were fielded by the Max-Planck-Institute in the early 1980s in Baden-Wurttemburg and Texas (Teske and Arnold, 1982) and were later replicated in Hungary and two Swiss cantons (Schwarzenegger, 1989).

The idea of different countries funding an international polling organization to add victimization questions to ongoing polls has never been seen as attractive, because of doubts about how carefully it would be carried out. On its own initiative, however, Gallup included some victimization questions in polls in 22 countries in 1984 (Gallup International, 1984). The International Crime (Victims) Survey, with which this article deals, represents the most far-reaching use of a standardized survey to look at crimes against individuals and their property in different countries. The same questionnaire was used, and survey procedures and data analysis were controlled as closely as possible to ensure comparability. The first survey was in 1989. Fifteen countries took part, a larger number than initially envisaged.[3] The second survey took place in 1992. Eight of the countries participating in the first survey did so again, and five new ones entered. Full details of the 1989 and 1992 surveys are reported in Van Dijk, Mayhew and Killias (1990) and in Van Dijk and Mayhew (1992). Parallel to these surveys, a number of other industrialized, Eastern and Central European countries have used the ICS questionnaire.[4] In 1992, moreover, UNICRI and the Dutch Ministry of Justice co-ordinated standardized surveys in twelve developing countries, mainly at city level (*see* Del Frate *et al.* (1993) for results). In 1996 the survey will be repeated in more than twenty countries and carried out for the first time in fifteen new countries. Some items of the ICS-questionnaire were also included in the Eurobarometer, at the request of the European Commission's Secretary General.

Samples in most of the industrialized countries were 2,000 households per year. One randomly selected respondent aged 16 or more was questioned. In most countries interviews were by telephone, using computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) which allows tighter standardization of questionnaire administration.[5] People were asked about their experience of crime in the previous year and over the past five years. Questions were also asked about fear of crime, satisfaction with policing, crime prevention behaviour, and the preferred sentence for a young burglar. Victims were asked to rate the seriousness of their victimization on a scale of 1 to 3.

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3. City surveys were also conducted in Warsaw (Poland) and Surabaja (Indonesia).
4. The surveys were financed by country agencies and were co-ordinated by the Dutch Ministry of Justice in tandem with Inter/View (a Dutch company) who subcontracted fieldwork to companies in seventeen countries. National surveys were done independently, though with the same questionnaire, in Japan, Poland, Finland (1992), Czechoslovakia (presently the Czech and Slovak Republic), Estonia (1993) and Georgia.
5. Where telephone interviewing was used, at least 70% of households had telephones, and in most countries the figures was nearly 90% or higher. A regionally well-spread selection of households was sampled with some variant of random digit dialling techniques. Additional statistical weighting corrected for imbalances in sampling. In Japan, Czechoslovakia, Poland, N.Ireland, Estonia, Georgia and part of Spain, face-to-face interviews were done, generally using standard national quota sampling procedures.

mance could have differed from country to country, affecting what respondents were (and were not) prepared to tell interviewers.

Fifthly, respondents were interviewed by telephone in most countries, and although methodological work suggests that this mode of interviewing is unlikely to greatly distort results, some differences between countries due to differences in the acceptability of being questioned by telephone cannot be entirely discounted.

The strict reliability of the ICS results, then, remains open of debate and it would be rash to see them as giving definitive estimates of crime in different countries. Nonetheless, the ICS is a unique source of comparative information about crime and assessments of crime and its results deserve closer inspection on this basis alone.

2. VICTIMIZATION RATES

The ICS has produced a wealth of results on levels of crime. Those presented here are necessarily selective, and centre on crime rates for some of the offences covered in the survey. The rates are the percentage of respondents who said they had experienced a particular crime once or more over the year – so-called population prevalence rates. Victimization rates for countries in both surveys are averaged for 1988 and 1991, and compared to those for other countries relating to either 1988 and or 1991.

2.1. Theft of cars

The risk of having a car stolen was highest in England and Wales, Georgia,[6] Australia, New Zealand, Italy, France and USA (figure 1). In these countries about 3% of owners had a theft in the last year. Victims in England, Scotland, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand were more likely than average to get their cars back, probably indicating more theft for 'joy-riding'. Recovery rates were relatively low in Italy, West Germany, and the Netherlands. In all countries taking part in both surveys, risks of car theft have increased between 1988 and 1991, and other indicators (from national surveys or police figures) substantiate this. The re-opening of the borders between Western and Eastern Europe seems to have caused a boom in car theft in the West.

6. The high rate for car theft in Georgia must probably be understood against the background of the civil war at the beginning of the 1990s (Del Frate *et al.*, 1993).

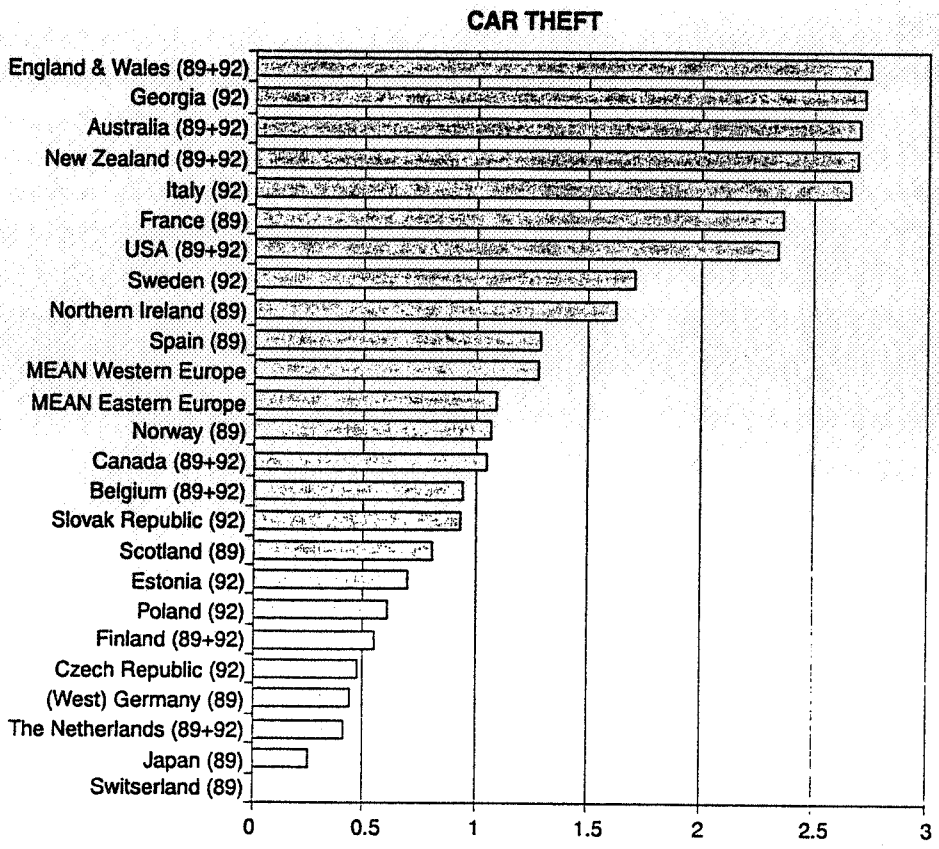
In this article we will firstly present some comparative data on the level of victimization by conventional crime in twenty-three industrialized nations. Victimisation rates for car theft, theft from cars, burglaries, contact crimes and aggressive crimes will be briefly discussed. Elsewhere we have looked in more detail at the economical and social correlates of national and regional crime rates (Van Dijk, 1995; Van Dijk, Van Kesteren, 1996; *see also* Aromaa and Ahven, 1993; Stangeland, 1996). Here we will focus our attention in the second part of the article on the seriousness of offences as viewed by crime victims. The opinions of victims from various countries about the seriousness of offences may or may not be fundamentally different. This issue is of great importance for the viability of comparative criminology. According to the prevailing, postmodern point of view, crime as a social phenomenon cannot be measured cross-nationally because its definitions are permanently renegotiated between the state and local or national interest groups. In this perspective, crime as socially constructed reality can only be studied properly within national or even local contexts. The varying and changing national definitions of narcotic offences are a case in point. Other criminologists, however, assume that due to a common cultural and legal heritage and the globalization of markets and mass media information, the definitions of most conventional crimes are fairly universal (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Braithwaite, 1989; Newman, 1976). This assumption of an international or European consensus on the definition of conventional crime is shared by the initiators of the International Crime (Victims) Survey.

The outcome of this criminological debate has important implications for the harmonization of criminal justice policies within Europe. If the public perceptions of crime are highly divergent, such harmonization will probably remain an illusion. If crime victims across Europe were to express similar opinions about the seriousness of various types of offences, this finding would put into question the relativists position and lend credence to the 'universality' assumption. The ICS data on seriousness rating by victims can shed some light on this issue.

From the outset the methodological limits of the ICS should be recognized. In 1989 in particular, response rates were variable, and in some countries rather low. Work was carried out to improve response rates, and resulted in an average response rate of 61% in the second survey as against 41% in the first. The question of whether results are influenced by the variability of response rates is a complex one. Van Dijk and Mayhew (1992) found that measured victimization rates did not relate in any clear way to response rates, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the size and direction of any bias. Secondly, the small sample sizes also produce fairly large sampling errors, and they limit the scope for subgroup analysis, at least within countries. In the third place, it is well-established that crime surveys are prone to other forms of response error, mainly to do with the frailty of respondents' memories, their reticence to talk about their experiences as victims, and their failure to realize an incident may be relevant to the survey. These factors probably mean, on balance, that the ICS underestimates the extent of crime; it certainly means that the survey measures public perceptions of crime as expressed to interviewers rather than 'real' experience. The critical issue here, of course, is whether response errors are constant across countries. The tendency to forget more trivial incidents of crime may be relatively universal, for instance, but results could be affected by different cultural thresholds for defining certain behaviour as crime, and for wanting to talk to interviewers about certain incidents (e.g. incidents of a sexual nature).

Fourthly, although survey administration was centrally organized, survey company perfor-

Figure 1: Percentage of the public victimized by car theft during one year

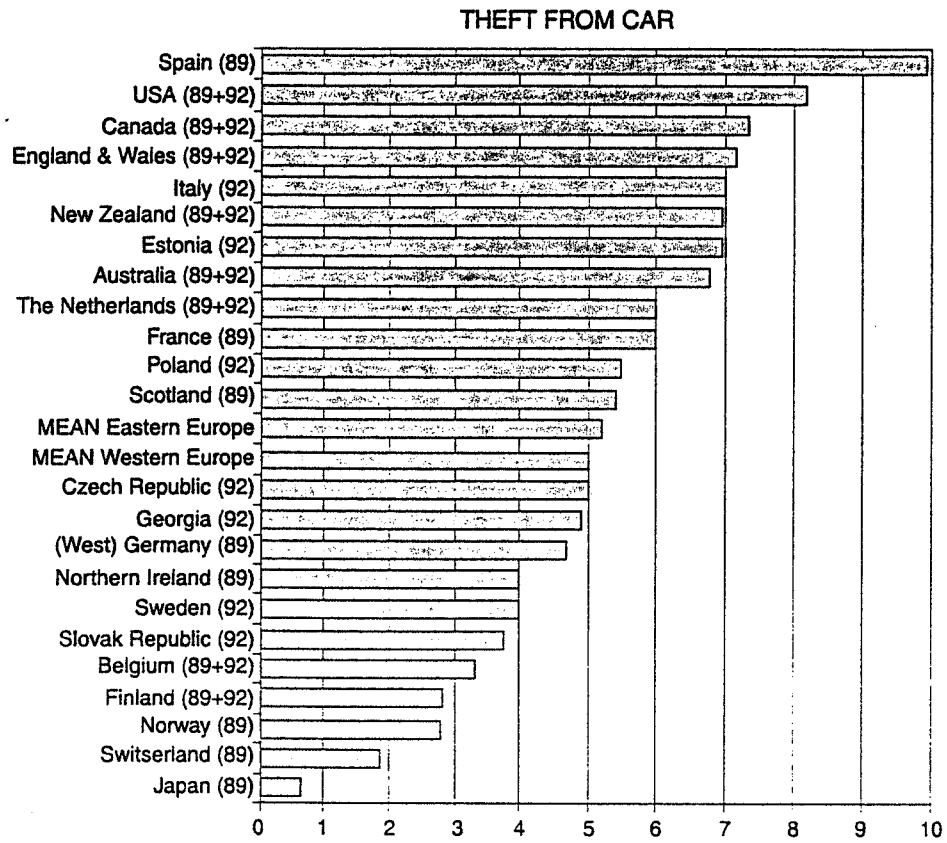


The level of car ownership varied considerably, being lowest in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Georgia and Spain. Prevalence rates for theft of cars correspond weakly to national ownership levels. A plentiful supply of vehicles seems to generate more crime – rather than, as might be imagined, criminal demand for vehicles being higher when targets are in shorter supply. For further discussions, *see* Van Dijk *et al.*, 1990; and Mayhew, 1990.

2.2. Theft from cars

Thefts from cars (luggage, radios, car mirrors etc) were high in Spain, USA, Canada, England and Wales, Italy, New Zealand and Estonia (figure 2): 8% of owners were victims. The ranking of countries on the basis of ownership rates is largely the same as the ranking on the basis of population rates, though Poland and Czechoslovakia are exceptions. Here, owners face strikingly higher risks – perhaps propelled by an acute shortage of spare parts in Eastern European countries.

Figure 2: Percentage of the public victimized by theft from car during one year



2.3. Bicycle theft

On average, bicycle owners were more likely to have a bicycle stolen than a car owner a car. Risks were especially high in the Netherlands, Sweden, Japan and New Zealand, where bicycle ownership is high: over 6% of owners were victims. The only offence for which Japan's figures were higher than average was bicycle theft.

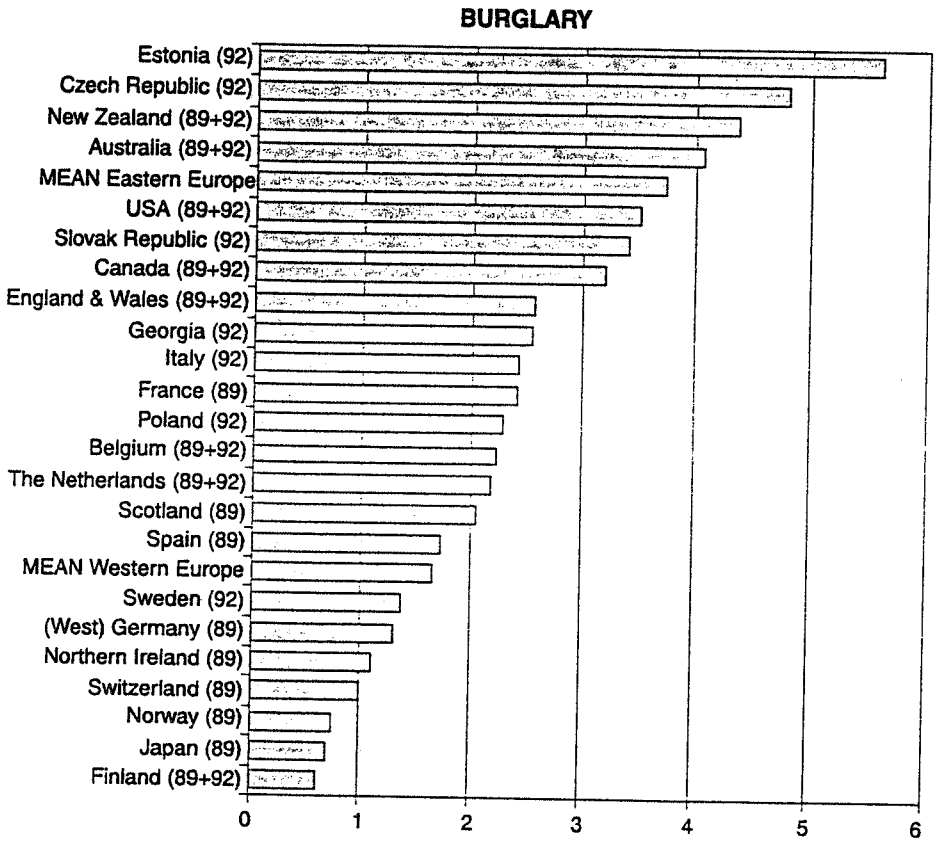
In countries where bicycle thefts are high, car thefts tend to be low. This may signify that many offenders who steal because of the need for temporary transport within a city make do with a bicycle if there are enough of them around. Or, more likely, it could reflect particular 'cultures' of vehicle theft. In England, for instance, the culture seems to be one of targeting cars, while in some other countries (notably the Netherlands) bicycle theft is more the offenders' national 'sport'.

2.4. Burglary

Burglars got into homes most often in Estonia, Czechoslovakia, New Zealand, Australia, USA and Canada: about 4% of households were victimized (figure 3). Within Western Eu-

rope, risks varied within a fairly narrow range: between just under 1% to just over 2% of households were targeted. Comparatively low rates were found in more rural countries such as Switzerland, Norway, Finland and Northern Ireland. Burglary rates in Japan were also low. The level of attempted burglary was fairly similar in most countries to actual burglary, and the position of countries on the two measures was broadly the same. Where burglars were successful in gaining entry, they were also most active in trying to do so.

Figure 3: Burglary

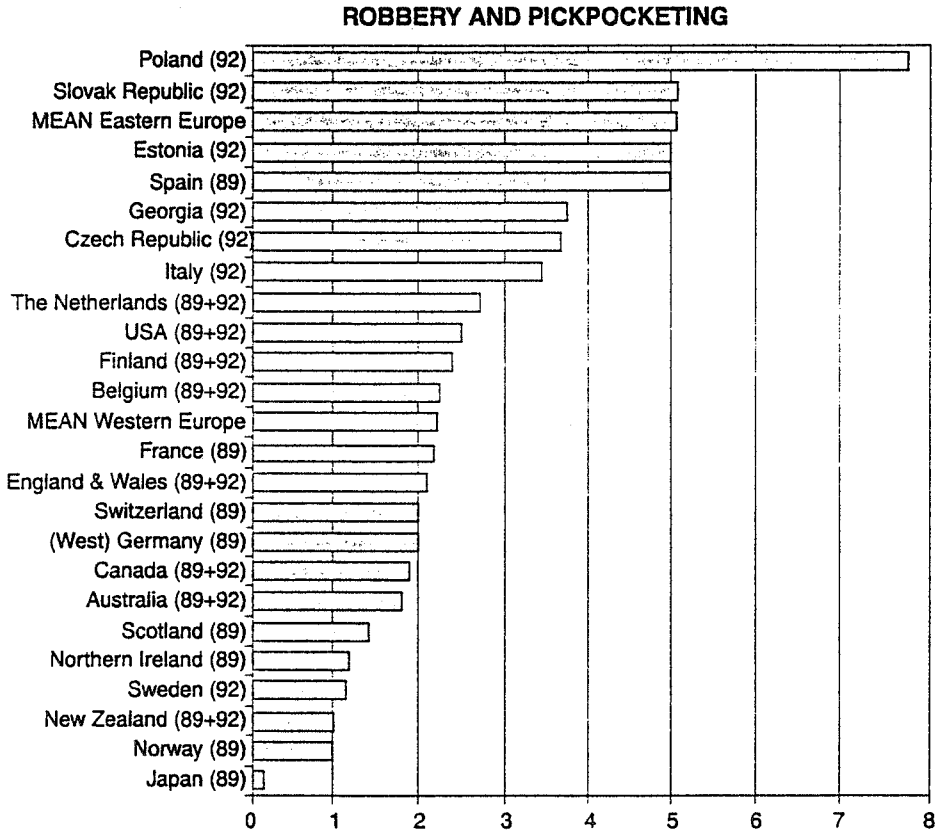


The 1992 ICS also looked at risks of break-ins to outbuildings (garages and sheds). Risks varied considerably across the limited number of countries in which the new 1992 ICS questionnaire was used. There were fewest victims in Belgium (0.9%), Italy (1.5%), and the Netherlands (2.1%); rather more in Poland (6.2%), New Zealand (4.8%) Australia (4.2%) and USA (4.0%). No information is available about which households in different countries are more or less likely to have 'outbuildings' around their home – though it might well be assumed that those living in detached or semi-detached houses have more such premises. Certainly, both burglaries and outbuilding break-ins were commoner in countries with more detached or semidetached homes – probably offering more targets for entry than highrise buildings.

2.5. Robbery and pickpocketing

The highest risks of robbery (theft with force) were in Spain (2.9%), Poland, USA and Italy. In about four out of ten incidents of robbery, the perpetrator(s) used a weapon; in two in ten a knife; and in one in ten a gun. Deviations were the high percentages of robberies with knives in Spain (40% in 1988), and with guns in Italy (17%) and USA (28% in 1988).[7] Pickpocketing was more common in Europe than outside it, though with some variations between countries. Risks were highest in Poland (about 6%), Czechoslovakia and Spain (about 3%), Italy, France and the Netherlands (about 2%). Figure 4 shows the combined risks of robbery and pickpocketing.

Figure 4: Robbery and pickpocketing



2.6. Assaults, threats and sexual offences

Measuring assaults in surveys (whether of a sexual or non-sexual nature) is accepted to be more difficult than measuring property crime. Definitions of assaults and readiness to report them to interviewers may differ across groups and – in a comparative survey – between

7. The question about use of weapons in robberies was not asked in the USA in the 1992 survey.

countries. Answers may also be influenced by the communicative skills of the interviewers, or their gender (though analysis showed no systematic relationship between the proportion of female interviewers and national rates of sexual incidents). The ICS findings must therefore be interpreted with care.

Only women were asked about sexual offences. The question allows a distinction between (i) sexual assaults (rape, attempted rape, and indecent assault), and (ii) offensive sexual behaviour. For all sexual incidents taken together, the highest year rates were in Australia (5.6%), Canada (4.1%), USA (3.7%), West Germany (3.3%) and Poland (3.2%). Overall, about a third of sexual incidents were seen as assaults, the rest as offensive sexual behaviour. Although, as said, these results must be viewed cautiously, the fact that the proportion of incidents seen as assaults was roughly similar in all countries lends some credibility to the differences in risk. On the face of it, there is little ground for believing that where high figures for sexual incidents emerge, these are boosted by a higher sensitivity among women in some countries to less serious sexual harassments.

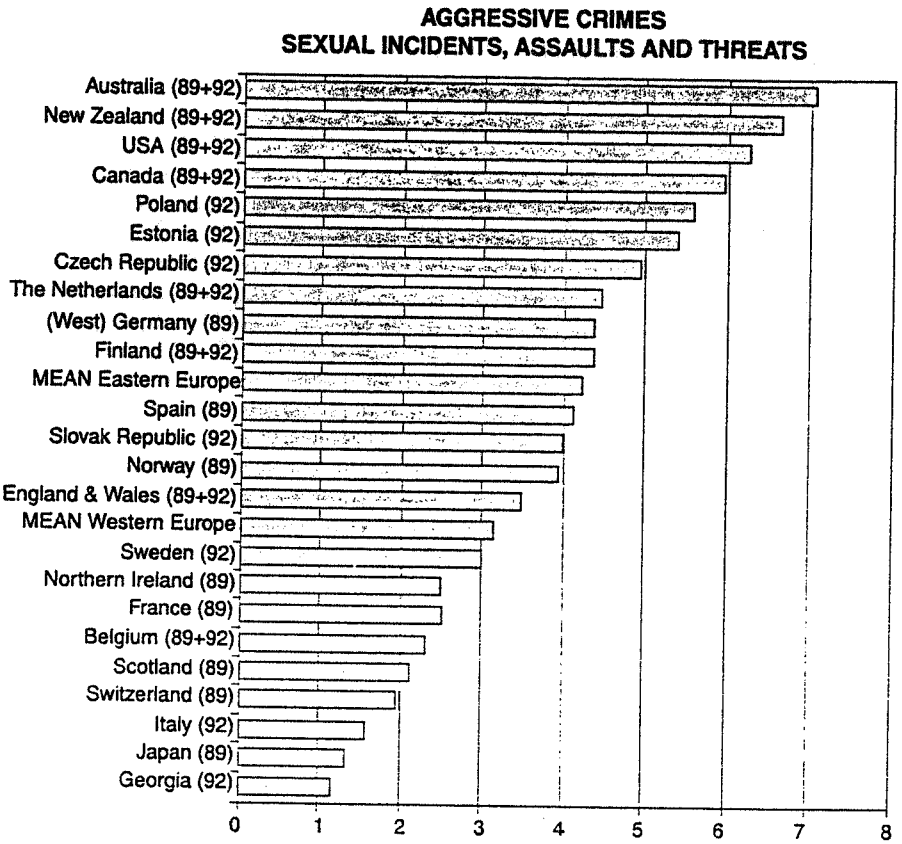
In the 1992 survey victims of offensive sexual behaviour were asked whether they regarded the incident as a crime. In the countries for which data are available, more women in Sweden, England, Belgium and Italy felt it was (in excess of 50%), whereas there were lower figures for USA, Canada and Australia (around 45%), and the lowest of all for the Netherlands (15%). Very tentatively then, in countries which might be seen as more permissive in their attitudes towards sexuality, women are sensitive to offensive sexual behaviour but seem less inclined to label it as criminal.

Assaults and threats were relatively high in New Zealand (5.7% in 1991), USA (5.0%), Australia (5.0%) and Canada (4.4%). Countries with slightly lower rates were Poland (4.0%), the Netherlands (3.7%), Czechoslovakia (3.4%) and Finland (3.2%). The lowest rates were measured in Japan (0.6%) Italy (0.8%), Switzerland (1.2%) and Georgia. Assaults with force comprised about half of these incidents, and country positions were similar to those for the broader picture.

A weapon was used as intimidation in 16% of threats. About one in ten assaults with force involved a weapon. Overall, half of those assaulted suffered injury, a quarter seeing a doctor as a result. About four in ten knew their offender at least by sight. On most of these indicators, the picture was fairly constant across different countries. This may indicate similar thresholds of seriousness and patterns of non-fatal violence.

There was fairly close correspondence in the picture across countries for assaults, threats and sexual incidents and thus figure 5 shows the combined risks of these.

Figure 5: Aggressive crime



In countries with the highest levels of aggressive criminality – Australia, USA, New Zealand, Canada, Poland, Estonia, Germany (West), the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Finland – consumption of beer per capita is relatively high.[8] Clearly, drinking patterns will be only one factor in explaining differences in aggressive behaviour, but given Fields' (1990) finding that in England the growth in beer consumption (rather than alcohol consumption per se) is strongly related to growth in violent crime, the ICS results are very thought provoking.

ICS rates of assaultive behaviour are only a rough guide to national levels of interpersonal violence. For one, they are only weakly related to the homicide rates according to World Health Organization (WHO) statistics. Thus, for instance, within Europe the Netherlands has a high ICS rate of assault, but a low homicide rate (1 per 100,000). The homicide rate of the USA is greatly in excess of European rates (9 per 100,000), although the ICS indicator of assault for the USA is by no means as disproportionately high. Killias (1993) has cogently argued, on the basis of ICS results about gun ownership and WHO data on levels of homicide with guns, that homicide rates are likely to reflect levels of gun ownership rather than underlying aggressive behaviour: countries with high gun ownership simply have more gun deaths.

8. National beer consumption rates and national rates for assault/threats are weakly correlated with each other (rank correlation 0.434; $p<.10$; $n=18$).

2.7. Overall victimization rates

The ICS allows a measure of the percentage of people victimized in the past year by any of the crimes covered by the survey (figure 6). This is a rough, albeit readily understandable indicator of the overall level of crime, although it conceals the extent to which people may have experienced more than one type of crime, it says nothing about the number of times they have been victimized, and ignores any differences in the degree of seriousness of what happened. It should be remembered, too, that figures for 1988 in some countries are compared with those for 1991 in others, and an average of the two in others.

Figure 6: Overall victimization rates for all crimes: % victim of any crime over the past year (1988, 1991)

27.5%-30.0%	New Zealand, Netherlands, Canada, Australia, USA
25.0%-27.4%	Poland, Estonia*, Czech Republic
22.5%-24.9%	England, Slovakia, Italy, Spain
20.0%-22.4%	TOTAL, Germany (West), Sweden, EUROPE
17.5%-19.9%	France, Scotland, Belgium, Finland
15.0%-17.4%	Norway, Switzerland, Georgia
12.5%-14.9%	N.Ireland
under 12.4%	Japan

Based on eleven crimes comparable across the two surveys. Average values for countries taking part twice.
* 1992

3. SERIOUSNESS RATING BY VICTIMS

Overall crime victimization rates as given in figure 6 ignore differences in the degree of seriousness of the types of crimes covered. Victimization by serious crimes like rape or robbery are given the same 'value' as victimization by petty theft.

Partly in response to discussions about the value of overall measures of recorded crime, Sellin and Wolfgang (1964) developed a scale for assessing the seriousness of different types of crime, which was widely used by other researchers (Buikhuisen, Van Dijk, 1975). With some exceptions, the public in various countries was found to rank the seriousness of different types of crime very similarly (Newman, 1976).

In these studies samples of the public were asked to rate the seriousness of a set of different crimes. In the second sweep of the ICVS all victims were asked to assess the seriousness of their own victimization on a three point scale (very serious, somewhat serious, not very serious). For each of the twelve types of crimes included in the questionnaire the average seriousness rating by victims was calculated per country. Five types of crime were subdivided. Car theft was split into car theft and joyriding (car recovered), robbery into robbery with and without the use of a weapon, and simple theft into pickpocketing and other theft.

Subdivisions were also made between sexual assaults and other sexual incidents and between threats and assaults (force was actually used).

The average seriousness scores of seventeen types of crime for 14 countries were calculated on the basis of the counting rule that the category very serious is worth three points, the category serious two points and the category not so serious one point. If, for instance, all victims in a country said their victimization by a particular crime type was very serious, the average score for this type of crime was three. If all victims rated certain crimes as not very serious, the average score would have been one.

We will first examine whether and how the average seriousness scores for some types of crimes vary across countries. In figure 7 the average seriousness scores of nine types of crime and of all crime together per country are given.

Figure 7: Average scores on a three point scale of seriousness for some types of crime and overall per country

	Total	joy riding	theft from car	car damage	bicycle theft	burglary	robbery with weapon	pick-pocket-ing	sexual ass.	assaults
Total		2.36	1.69	1.58	1.78	2.28	2.51	2.00	2.40	2.24
England and Wales	2.03	2.22	1.64	1.48	1.78	2.56	2.48	2.06	2.35	2.14
the Nether-lands	1.96	2.48	1.54	1.41	1.68	2.26	2.45	1.96	2.31	2.26
Belgium	2.01	2.26	1.80	1.68	1.76	2.33	2.26	2.07	2.49	2.37
Finland	2.03	2.61	1.72	1.76	1.90	2.33	2.58	1.97	2.30	2.18
Sweden	1.94	2.09	1.47	1.39	1.58	1.87	2.41	1.86	2.21	2.29
Italy	2.29	2.47	1.86	1.86	1.84	2.44	2.79	2.17	2.73	2.64
Canada	2.06	2.35	1.59	1.56	1.82	2.32	2.60	2.08	2.68	2.24
Australia	2.13	2.41	1.69	1.55	1.89	2.45	2.78	2.12	2.66	2.33
New Zealand	2.15	2.38	1.81	1.58	1.99	2.33	2.49	2.26	2.64	2.45
Poland	2.03	2.32	1.73	1.63	1.80	2.21	2.38	2.10	2.42	2.05
Czech Republic	1.72	2.46	1.35	1.36	1.84	1.62	2.09	1.71	1.76	1.91
Slovakia	1.97	3.00	1.72	1.62	2.18	1.93	3.00	2.06	2.01	2.21
Georgia	2.09	2.66	2.05	2.28	1.47	2.46	2.40	1.90	2.36	-
Estonia	1.94	2.47	1.71	1.77	1.74	2.01	2.38	1.65	2.40	2.08

The results show that the mean scores per country for the various types of crime do not differ much. If we look at the overall mean scores for all types of crime, the Czech Republic, Sweden, Estonia and the Netherlands stand out with relatively low seriousness scores. Victims in Italy, Australia and New Zealand were most likely to view offences as (very) serious. These differences might be the result of the different connotations of the term 'serious' in certain languages.

The ratings are based on the opinions of crime victims. In the case of some types of crime (e.g. car theft, motorcycle theft and armed robbery) the number of victims per country is rather low and so sampling error might be considerable. The opinions on motorcycle theft of

the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Georgia, for instance, are based on less than ten respondents.

On the basis of the average seriousness scores per type of crime per country the seventeen different types of crime were classified. Crime types which were viewed by victims as the most serious were given the highest rank. In this ranking differences between the mean seriousness scores per country are of no consequence. The results indicate how victims in various countries rank different types of crime in terms of seriousness. Although victims in Italy tend to view almost all types of crime as more serious than those in the Netherlands, they may rank them in the same order. If the rankings are fairly similar this indicates a high measure of consensus about the seriousness of conventional crimes. Figure 8 gives the rankings of the various types of crime per country and the overall ranking in the top row.

Figure 8: Ranking of seventeen types of crime according to seriousness ratings by victims, per country and overall

	joy riding	car theft	theft from car	car damage	motor-cycle theft	bicycle theft	burglary	attempt at bur-glary	theft from garages	robbery with weapon	robbery without weapon	pick-pocket-ing	personal theft	sexual ass.	indecent behav.	assaults	threats
Total	3/4	2	15	17	7	12	5	12	15	1	8	9	11	3/4	13	6	10
England and Wales	4	6	16	17	5	13	1	11	15	2	9	9	14	3	12	7	10
the Netherlands	1	10	16	17	6	14	4	13	15	2	9	8	12	3	11	5	7
Belgium	5	6	13	16	7	15	3	10	12	4	14	8	11	1	17	2	8
Finland	1	17	15	14	5	12	3	6	13	2	8	10	11	4	16	7	8
Sweden	7	1	15	17	6	14	8	13	16	2	4	9	12	5	11	3	10
Italy	5	5	16	15	9	17	7	12	14	1	4	11	13	2	10	3	8
Canada	3	7	16	17	5	12	4	11	15	2	8	9	13	1	14	6	10
Australia	5	3	16	17	7	11	4	13	15	1	10	9	12	2	14	6	8
New Zealand	5	1	16	17	9	11	6	13	15	3	8	7	14	2	12	4	10
Poland	4	1	12	16	6	11	5	17	15	3	10	7	8	2	13	9	14
Czech Republic	2	1	17	16	15	5	9	12	8	3	11	7	10	6	14	4	13
Slowakia	2	17	12	13	14	5	8	9	10	1	3	6	11	7	16	4	15
Georgia	2	1	9	7	6	14	3	8	15	4	10	11	12	5	13	16	17
Estonia	2	1	11	9	6	10	7	14	12	4	16	15	8	3	17	5	13

The results show that, with a few exceptions, victims across the Western world tend to rank the different types of crimes very similarly. The most serious crimes are armed robbery, car theft, sexual assault, joyriding and burglary. Victims considered car vandalism, theft from garages, theft from a car and indecent behaviour to be least serious. Interestingly, victims in Eastern Europe tend to view car theft as more serious than those elsewhere. This difference might reflect the scarcity and higher value of cars in former socialist countries.

The similarity between the rankings per country can be expressed in correlations. Figure 9 gives the correlations between the rankings of the 17 types of crime per country and the overall ranking.

Figure 9: Correlations between the seriousness ranking of types of crimes by victims per country and the overall ranking

Correlations	Average
England & Wales	.8799
the Netherlands	.8903
Belgium	.8812
Finland	.4154
Sweden	.8311
Italy	.8484
Canada	.9202
Australia	.9580
New Zealand	.9351
Poland	.8776
Czech Republic	.7349
Slovak Republic	.7366
Georgia	.7418
Estonia	.8138

All corrections are significant ($p<0.01$; $n=14$), with the exception of Finland.

The results show that in all countries except Finland, the national rankings are very similar to the overall ranking. The national rankings of the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Georgia are also somewhat deviant. In the case of Finland and Slovakia the (low) rank of car theft is the most important outlier. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia motorcycle theft is ranked much higher than elsewhere. These particular scores, however, are based on very low numbers and might therefore be statistical artefacts. The overall conclusion is that victims across Western countries have strikingly similar ideas about the relative seriousness of conventional crimes.

These results confirm the underlying assumption of the ICS project that the definitions, perceptions and normative judgments on conventional crimes are fairly universal. As much as opinions may differ about some types of offences (narcotic offences are a prime example), there seems to be consensus about the seriousness of crimes which make up the traditional core of most criminal codes (the so-called *mala per se*).

4. TOWARDS A BETTER INDICATOR OF CRIME

4.1. Correcting for perceived seriousness

As stated, the overall prevalence rate ignores the degree of seriousness of the victimization. In this paragraph, we will present an overall prevalence rate which reflects the (perceived) seriousness of the victimization. Each type of crime will be given a weight according to its mean seriousness score.

To determine these weights, a decision must be made about the numerical values given to the three categories of the scale of seriousness. In the results presented above the seriousness scores were calculated on a simple 3, 2, 1 basis (very serious: 3; serious: 1; not so serious: 2).

To allow a straightforward comparison with the uncorrected prevalence rate, the middle category of 'serious' was given the value of one. In order to determine the value of the other two categories, we tested several options and compared the resulting rankings of types of crime with those in previous studies (Buikhuisen, Van Dijk (1975). This external validation indicated that the ratio 1.75; 1; 0.25 was the best. It should be pointed out, that the choice of the intervals did not greatly influence the outcome of the weighting procedures.

An alternative to the prevalence rate (percentage of the public victimized at least once by any type of crime) is the sum of all victimization rates for different types of crime (the sum of the rates for car theft, theft from car, burglary etc.). Since some respondents are victimized by more than one type of crime during a year the total of all victimization rates is higher than the prevalence rates given in figure 6. In the present analysis a correction was applied to the total overall prevalence rates on the basis of the mean seriousness ratings of respondents from fourteen countries.[9] We have applied, so to speak, international weights for seriousness to the victimization experiences of the respondents. In figure 10 the total victimization rates of 23 nations and the rates which are weighted for the seriousness of the types of crime are given.

Figure 10: Total overall victimization rates without and with correction for seriousness, for 23 industrialized countries

	Unweighted rate	Weighted rate	% Difference
Total	32.22	28.98	-10.12
England & Wales (2x)	35.56	31.64	-11.20
Scotland	23.67	20.97	-11.73
Northern Ireland	19.14	17.29	-9.73
the Netherlands (2x)	41.06	35.75	-12.95
Germany	29.75	25.76	-13.75
Switzerland	18.59	16.47	-11.77
Belgium (2x)	25.81	23.16	-10.60
France	28.02	25.51	-8.96
Norway	20.37	18.10	-11.35
Finland (2x)	24.26	21.54	-4.66
Spain	35.02	31.64	-9.65
Sweden	29.60	26.39	-11.06
Italy	33.33	30.13	-9.69
USA (2x)	45.63	41.05	-10.17
Canada (2x)	41.92	36.93	-12.17
Australia (2x)	45.24	40.93	-9.57
New Zealand	48.00	43.24	-9.91
Japan	9.50	8.25	-13.88

9. The seriousness ratings are only available for 14 industrialized countries.

	Unweighted rate	Weighted rate	% Difference
Poland	43.15	38.96	-9.74
Czech Republic	37.33	34.23	-8.37
Slovakia	33.62	30.87	-8.33
Georgia	22.51	21.83	-3.09
Estonia	49.90	45.82	-8.32

As we can see, the corrected rates are lower for all nations. Since the victimizations were weighted on a basis of 1.75; 1; 0.25, this finding indicates that in all countries more victimizations were viewed as not very serious than as very serious. In most countries the corrected overall rate is between ten and fifteen percent lower than the unweighted rate.

In percentage points the deviations are the largest for West Germany, Japan, Northern Ireland, Scotland and the Netherlands. The overall victimization rate of these nations is apparently composed of relatively less serious incidents (such as bicycle thefts or car vandalism).

The corrections for seriousness are the lowest for Georgia, Finland, Estonia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Here the overall victimization rates are apparently to a larger extent made up of incidents that are internationally viewed as serious or very serious.

The ranking of countries in terms of overall crime levels depicted in figure 6 is only marginally altered by the corrections for seriousness. The corrected rates of New Zealand, Estonia, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia, USA, Poland and England/Wales are still at the top. This result shows that overall prevalence rates, although ignoring differences in degree of seriousness, are fairly good indicators of the overall level of crime.

Corrections for seriousness would probably be more substantial if some of the most serious offences such as homicide were included. The corrected prevalence rate of the USA would certainly become much higher after inclusion of homicides. It should be borne in mind, however, that for ordinary people the risk to be victimized by such crimes is remote. Our results suggest that overall prevalence rates can be used as an indicator of the national level of frequently occurring crimes. This is so because victimization experiences seem to be a similar mixture of serious and less serious incidents everywhere. For similar reasons Blumstein (1974) concluded that the Sellin-Wolfgang indexes contribute no significant information to the national crime index trends of the FBI.

4.2. Correcting for national perceptions of seriousness

In the previous paragraph overall rates were corrected for the seriousness of the types of crimes, as viewed collectively by victims in fourteen countries. As noted, the public in some countries, like Italy, tends to rate all types of offences as more serious than elsewhere. In such countries the total of all victimization experiences is viewed as more serious, even if it is made up of the same mixture of types of offences.

In this paragraph the total overall victimization rates are corrected for the seriousness of the types of offences as viewed by the victims per country.[10] This analysis could only be made for fourteen countries. The results are given in figure 11.

Figure 11: Total overall victimization rates, corrected for the seriousness of types of offences according to opinions of victims per country

	Unweighted	Weighted	% Difference
Total	38.25	34.05	-11.05
England and Wales	45.70	39.45	-13.88
the Netherlands	45.65	35.91	-21.64
Belgium	26.16	24.06	- 8.07
Finland	29.04	27.42	- 5.58
Sweden	29.60	21.99	-26.24
Italy	33.33	35.24	+ 5.78
Canada	44.00	38.67	-12.11
Australia	47.52	44.52	- 6.38
New Zealand	48.00	46.41	- 3.31
Poland	43.15	38.58	-10.62
Czech Republic	37.33	25.72	-31.37
Slovakia	33.62	31.65	- 5.96
Georgia	22.51	24.35	+ 8.36
Estonia	49.90	42.74	-14.61

In most countries more victims rated their experiences as not very serious than as very serious. In these countries the corrected victimization rates are lower than the original ones. This is notably the case with the rates for the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Sweden. Here the corrected rate is twenty to thirty percent lower.

Countries where victims rated their experiences as relatively more serious are Georgia and Italy.

Because the corrections are substantial and not in the same direction, the rank order of the nations changed significantly.

The Netherlands, for instance, falls from fourth to sixth position. If nations are rank ordered in terms of the subjectively perceived seriousness of their victimization experiences the league tables are somewhat different from those presented in figures 6 and 10.

For the purpose of comparing crime levels cross-nationally, a measure which reflects the weight of the national crime burden according to an international standard of seriousness seems preferable over a measure reflecting national perceptions of seriousness. As explained above, national seriousness ratings might be affected by different connotations of the word seriousness. For some analytic purposes, however, the latter, more subjective, measure might be more relevant, for instance in an analysis of the impact of the level of crime on fear of crime. In countries where the burden of crime is subjectively viewed as very serious, fear of crime might be more prevalent, even if, objectively, the level of crime is moderate (and *vice versa*).

10. In this operation we also applied the values 1.75; 1; 0.25 to the three categories of seriousness.

5. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN CRIME-SPECIFIC RATES AND THE CORRECTED OVERALL PREVALENCE RATE

The finding that overall prevalence rates per country are made up of roughly similar mixtures of serious and less serious crimes leads to the subsequent question which types of crime are the best predictors of the overall level of crime.

To explore this issue, we computed the correlations between the corrected total prevalence rates - our best measure of the overall level of crime (*see* figure 10) – and the specific prevalence rates for the twelve main types of crime (*see* for instance figures 1-5). The results are given in figure 12.

Figure 12: Correlations between offence specific victimization rates and overall total prevalence rates, corrected for seriousness (n=23)

joy riding	.1953
car theft	.3585
theft from car	.7583**
car damage	.4676
motorcycle theft	.0776
bicycle theft	.3310
burglary	.8174**
attempted burglary	.8441**
theft from garages etc.	.7274**
robbery with weapon	.2766
robbery no weapon	.6744**
pickpocketing	.3520
personal thefts	.7461**
sexual assault	.6166*
indecent behaviour	.2762
assault	.6508**
threat	.7778**

*) $p<.01$
**) $p<.001$

The results show that the rates for attempted burglary, burglary, theft from a car and threats are the best predictors of the overall prevalence rates. The rate for attempted burglary is most strongly correlated to the overall rate (r=.84). The level of these crimes seems least affected by crime specific opportunity structures or special traditions of offending which vary across nations.

Some offence-specific victimization rates do not significantly correlate with the overall victimization rate. This is the case with national rates for car theft, joyriding, motorcycle and bicycle theft, armed robbery, pickpocketing and sexual incidents. Our findings suggest that the level of these offences is determined by crime specific opportunity structures – ownership

rates of cars or weapons – which vary across nations. In paragraph 2 we have discussed some concrete examples.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of the ICS indicate that crime currently impinges on many people's lives with, for instance, over one in five of those in most of the countries covered having experienced at least one incident of theft or damage to their property, or some form of aggressive behaviour in the last year. No doubt political capital has been and will continue to be made by exaggerating the problem of crime, but levels of actual risk are far from negligible, whether or not these are mitigated by insurance premiums or social support.

At the same time, the ICS results help put national crime problems in perspective. In many Western countries the public view is probably that crime is a 'national ill' for which lax parenting, soft judges, inadequate leisure provision, unemployment and so on can be blamed. There may well be little awareness that other countries with different family infrastructures, or different politically-oriented governments face similar problems. The ICS data clearly dismiss the notion of high crime rates as unique to just one or two countries. With the most obvious exceptions of Japan and Switzerland, all industrialized countries suffer from an appreciable level of property and aggressive crime, particularly in more urbanized areas.

The ICS results concerning the rating of crimes in terms of seriousness show a high degree of consistency across fourteen countries. In all these countries the seventeen types of crime covered by the survey are rated very similarly. This result points to the existence of a broad consensus among the public about the seriousness of different types of conventional crime. The latter finding lends support to the underlying assumption of the ICS that certain basic notions about crime are fairly universal across countries.

Although the public in Europe may hold different opinions about the criminal nature of certain victimless crimes like narcotic offences, there seems to be consensus about the seriousness of conventional crimes. In this respect, further harmonization of criminal justice policies in Europe seems sociologically feasible.

More specifically the results on seriousness scaling allow a critical assessment of the value of overall victimization rates as indicators of the level of crime. The analysis showed that overall prevalence rates – the percentage of the public victimized by any of the crimes included in the survey – provide a reasonably good measure of the level of crime. A measure was constructed which takes into account the seriousness of the various types of crime as viewed by victims in all countries together. These adjusted measures correlate strongly with the simple overall prevalence rate. The criminological league table of countries is little altered by the application of objective weights of seriousness to the various types of crime included in the overall prevalence rate.

A different picture emerges if national victimization experiences are weighed on the basis of the seriousness ratings of the victims of each country separately. In some countries all victimization experiences are rated as less or more serious than elsewhere. As a consequence the overall measures of crime corrected for national seriousness scores differ markedly from the simple prevalence rates. In countries like the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Sweden the corrected measure is considerably lower than the prevalence rates. In countries like Italy the latter, more subjective measure is higher than the prevalence rate.

For most theoretical purposes the simple overall prevalence rate seems a good indicator of national crime problems. The prevalence rates for attempted burglary and threats were found to be highly correlated with the adjusted overall prevalence rate. With a single interview question on (attempted) burglary a fairly accurate estimate can be obtained of the overall level of crime in nations, regions or cities. The prevailing notion that victimization surveys require comprehensive questionnaires, covering all types of frequently occurring crimes, must be reconsidered. For many theoretical and practical purposes a very limited set of items might suffice. Preliminary comparisons of the results of the first International Crimes against Business Survey with the rates of the ICS suggest that in countries where e.g. rates for household burglary were high, more businesses reported burglaries too (Van Dijk, Terlouw, 1995). The total burden of (conventional) crime, carried by both the private and the commercial sectors of society can perhaps be estimated by interviewing just a modest sample of households about their experiences with one or two types of minor crime, like (attempted) burglary.

As we have argued elsewhere the total volume of crime is determined jointly by both motivational factors and opportunities for crime (Van Dijk, 1995). Motivational factors like youth unemployment and anomia seem to be the driving force behind the crime booms in Eastern and Central Europe today. Such countries characteristically suffer from a high level of street robberies. In most of the other industrialized countries the volume and shape of the crime seems largely determined by the availability of suitable targets and the insufficient quality of natural surveillance and self-protection against crime (Cohen, Felson, 1979; Van Dijk, 1995). In these countries opportunistic crimes like vandalism and petty theft make up a major part of the crime problem. Due to improved self protection against crime the overall levels of crime are levelling off in the USA. The level of serious violence is still high though and youth violence is rising. In several Member States of the European Union property crimes are now also fairly stable. In the coming years, the gradual emergence of an underclass of permanently unemployed people in several West European megacities might result in a qualitative transformation of the crime problem. Street robberies and other acts of instrumental violence might become more common. If no special preventive policies are introduced, the European crime problem may soon take on grimmer features.

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